

**Gorshenina, Svetlana:** *L'invention de l'Asie centrale. Histoire du concept de la Tartarie à l'Eurasie*. Genève: Droz, 2014, 704 pp., ISBN 978-2-6000-1788-6

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For many scholars of Central Asia it is part and parcel of their daily work to explain to colleagues of neighboring disciplines where, and also what, Central Asia is. Given the staggering array of terms that could be used to describe the region and the socio-political spaces that come with it (such as “Central Eurasia”, “Inner Asia”, “Middle Asia” etc.) this is not only a frustrating venture, but often also results in the acknowledgment that a range of people in various places around the world have very different visions of where and what Central Asia is and should be. A major contribution of Svetlana Gorshenina’s monograph *L'invention de l'Asie centrale* is that it provides the reader with a rich and detailed analysis of how the concept of Central Asia has developed over time.

In her carefully edited book, which is based on the second part of her dissertation titled “From Tataria to Central Asia: The Heart of a Continent in the History of Ideas, between Cartography and Geopolitics”,<sup>1</sup> Gorshenina does not seek a clear-cut answer to the question of where Central Asia can be located (or even what “it” is). She rather analyzes how different answers to this question have emerged, and become entangled and disconnected over time. Spanning a mind-boggling period of 1700 years and including sources in English, French, German and Russian, as well as visual materials, Gorshenina convincingly demonstrates the ways in which Central Asia has been shaped by debates and practices related to historical myths, physical geography and political discourse.

In fifteen chapters (excluding the introduction and conclusion), Gorshenina leads the reader from the early artifacts of knowledge on Central Asia, the myth of Gog and Magog, and the *mappaemundi*, via the history of orientalist research and geographical exploration to nineteenth century colonialism, and on to Soviet times, and finally contemporary academic debates on Central Asia. In the introduction Gorshenina sets out to define a framework for her analysis which serves its purpose well throughout the book: by focusing on the *longue durée* of the different threads that make up Central Asia as a concept (p. 33) she puts an emphasis on long-term effects and links between different conceptualizations of Central Asia. This approach binds the different chapters together and

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<sup>1</sup> Gorshenina 2007. The first part of Gorshenina’s dissertation was published as a monograph in 2012 (see Gorshenina 2012).

provides the reader with a sense of historical connectivity that is both fascinating and original. The omnipresent figure of Prester John as mythical king and patriarch of the Christians in the East in medieval historiography (p. 102) serves as an example for this, as does the overall and continuous influence of developments in global history on the making of Central Asia. This dynamic approach is complemented by a thorough analysis of historical maps and visual materials that illustrate how different conceptualizations of Central Asia have changed, but also merged over time. Gorshenina guides the reader well through these complex materials and, for instance, skillfully shows how mythical images of the Tartary were slowly replaced by reports from European travellers from the thirteenth century onwards (p. 125).

Not surprisingly, given the increased availability of sources for this period, about half of the monograph is devoted to the analysis of conceptualizations of Central Asia between the late eighteenth century and the present (from p. 283 onwards). Gorshenina calls this point in time the “birth of Central Asia” (*la naissance de l’Asie centrale*) due to a change in terminology based on the interplay of geographical exploration and emerging geopolitical interests. However, consequent in her approach to historical connectivity, Gorshenina does not perceive this “new era” as completely distinct from previous conceptualizations of Central Asia, and she points to the significance of Marco Polo and the medieval cartographers for this period (p. 284).

In the following chapters, Gorshenina presents a detailed account of how explorers and scientists of various national backgrounds prepared the ground for Russian imperial expansion in the nineteenth century. As she argues, the geopolitical struggle between the Russian and British empires in Central Asia, which eventually resulted in the *Great Game*, did not simply lead to competing and contradicting geographical categorizations of the region exclusively based on claims from physical geography (p. 357). At the same time, at the end of the nineteenth century, mythical images of Turan, and of Central Asia as a historical antithesis to Iran, re-gained pervasiveness (p. 397) and later on fed into Eurasianist discourse (p. 484).

In the course of her analysis, Gorshenina does not present “new” historical sources in the sense of previously un- or lesser-known materials. Her central arguments are based on literature available in English, French, German and Russian. However, her approach, which puts emphasis on inter-linkages between different geographical categorizations and political contexts, sheds light on salient historical continuities. Of particular importance for an understanding of the Russian take on Central Asia are chapters nine to twelve, in which Gorshenina focuses on the emergence of the terminological pair “Middle Asia” (*Srednaia Aziia*) and “Central Asia” (*Tsentral’naia Aziia*). First influenced

by German geographers (p. 363), Russian scientists developed an alternate, politicized concept of Central Asia which allowed their own colonies to gain center stage (p. 467). Despite the disappearance of many geographical categorizations since the nineteenth century, this particular terminology has remained in use throughout the Soviet period and up to the present day (p. 469).

Thanks to the accessible style and abundance of visualizations of abstract scientific concepts Gorshenina's book is generally a pleasure to read. From a critical perspective, the wealth of empirical material could have been reduced in order to make space for more theoretical reflections on space and the meaning of the *longue durée* for contemporary scholars of Central Asia. It, for instance, remains unclear why the *longue durée* of Central Asia as a concept needs to be depicted in a chronological way. A focus on selected pervasive topoi and links could have helped to further structure and shape the wealth of data. In addition, the monograph's overall emphasis on sources in European languages suggests that one should read this particular history of the invention of Central Asia as being specifically situated in a European academic setting. It goes without saying that this history might have taken a distinctively different shape if it had been written, for instance, from a Chinese perspective and based on Chinese sources.

Despite these minor issues, the monograph constitutes an important contribution to the field of Central Asian studies and ties in with current efforts in various strands of regional studies to seek a way beyond the limitations of areal containers. Gorshenina's focus on historical links, continuities and ruptures in the invention of Central Asia will surely help scholars to better explain and understand how the concept emerged, and to question the genealogies it is embedded in and our use of "it" in our own research.

## Bibliography

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